

John's Baptism of Repentance

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

The New Testament opens with a call to repentance. The ministry of John the Baptist was pre-eminently devoted to emphasizing its importance. Sent of God in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord, he found a self-satisfied, self-righteous nation prating of being the chosen people professedly waiting for the promised Messiah, and yet utterly unready to welcome Him because of their low moral condition.

Like the Tishbite, he appeared suddenly and unannounced, a wilderness preacher, declaring to the abjects of Israel first, and then as others sought him out, to the self-righteous scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees the need of heart preparation for the reception of the Kingdom. His message was summed up in the pregnant words: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It was a challenge to face their sins and the true state of their hearts in the light of the holiness and righteousness of God. And we are glad to learn that the publicans and sinners hearing him justified God and were baptized in recognition of the judgment of self and the need of remission of sins.

For with the preaching was linked the rite of baptism. It was definitely declared to be a baptism of repentance for (or unto) the remission of sins. That is, those who submitted to his baptism were practically saying: 'In this act I declare my change of mind, my new attitude toward myself, my sins, and my God. I own my unworthiness, and I cast myself upon the infinite mercy of God, looking to Him for deliverance, counting on Him to forgive my sins and graciously fit me for the reception of the King and a place in the Kingdom of the heavens.'

I do not say that all who were baptized entered into its full meaning, but I do insist that this was its true import. Baptism, of course, did not procure remission of sins. It was simply the acknowledgment of the need of such forgiveness. Those so baptized might be likened to debtors giving their notes in recognition of their indebtedness. When our Lord condescended to be identified with this remnant by Himself undergoing baptism He was, as it were, endorsing their notes, declaring that He was ready to meet all their responsibilities by fulfilling every righteous demand of the throne of God on their behalf. It was more than three years later that He said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened [or pained] till it be accomplished." Ah, the notes were fast falling due, and on the cross He must settle in bloody agony for them all.

How much of this John, the forerunner, saw it is not easy to say. But that he did have some insight into the great truth, that Jesus was not only Messiah but Saviour, was evidenced by his words, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!" His baptism of repentance was with a view to the remission of sins through the offering up of the foreordained Lamb as a propitiatory sacrifice.

To the haughty, self-righteous leaders John said: "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance." And then he warned them that natural relationship to Abraham would not save anybody, but spiritual kinship only; for faith alone makes one a child of the faithful patriarch. "Fruits meet for repentance." That is, the changed life must evidence the changed attitude; otherwise there is no true repentance at all.

And then he declared: "Now also the ax is laid unto the root of the trees: Every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." How different this to the ameliorative measures advocated by many who should know better! Some modern preaching might be summed up in 'the axe is laid to the fruit of the tree.' Cut off the bad fruit. Prune the tree. Spray it with a religio-philosophical mixture. Change its environment if possible. Attempt by ethical culture, by religious education, to make the tree produce good fruit -- then all will be well. No need of repentance. No place for a second birth. But in spite of human reasoning, the divine principle remains unchanged. The tree is bad; that is why its fruit is corrupt. No use experimenting and trying to produce good fruit from so unwholesome a plant. Lay the axe to the root. Hew down the bad tree to make way for a new one of the heavenly Father's planting.

Repentance is the recognition, the avowed recognition, of God's estimate of the hopeless character of our hearts till renewed by the Word and Spirit of God. Grapes cannot be gathered from a thorn bush, nor figs from thistles. It is not the fruit that must be dealt with. The tree must be removed. To attempt to improve it is useless. God Himself has given it up. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately [literally, incurably] wicked." Therefore the need of a new heart and a new spirit.

It was thus that John prepared the way of the Lord. No matter with whom he dealt, he sought to expose the hidden evil of the heart and the need of self-judgment, which is just the recognition that, "in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." In order to make this manifest, covetous soldiers were commanded to be

content with their wages, tax-gatherers to exact no more than their due. Herod, the King himself -- who sought to patronize John, while living in vilest incest and licentiousness -- writhed as he heard the stern preacher declare, while he pointed to Herodias, "It is not lawful for thee to have her." A prison cell and later the executioner's sword might silence the tongue of the preacher of repentance, but his words live on forever, rebuking still the self-indulgent, the self-righteous, the covetous, the lustful, to the end of time, who fancy they can in some way bribe an offended God to overlook and condone their iniquity.

John the Baptist has been described as "the last of the prophets," and his ministry was certainly most intimately linked with that of the great prophetic brotherhood of the Old Testament. We have already seen how our Lord identifies him in spirit with Elijah; and to His questioning disciples, who were perplexed regarding the prediction in Malachi of Elijah's return prior to the ushering in of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, the Saviour replies, referring to John, "If ye will receive it, this is Elijah which was for to come." He came to break up the fallow ground that the word of the Kingdom might not be sown among thorns. Thus he was chosen of God as a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight in the desert a highway for our God. His was a leveling message. There were hills of pride to come down and valleys of degradation to be filled in by grace in order that the divine program might be expeditiously carried out.

In one sense his was a unique ministry which can never again be repeated, inasmuch as the same circumstances will never be duplicated. But there is a wider sense in which a similar message is always in order, for man's heart remains unchanged and the King is still seeking those who will acknowledge and bow to His authority. Hence the importance of ever insisting upon the need of repentance, a state of soul which must always precede blessing.

The words of the holy Virgin, in the Magnificat, have an ever present application: "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1:52-53). This is the same leveling doctrine as that proclaimed by John. It is the "no difference" doctrine of the Apostle Paul. Yet how the human heart rebels against it. How men pride themselves on fancied distinctions which God's eye does not discern.

"Must I be saved in the same way as my coachman?" indignantly asked a distinguished lady.

"Madam," was the faithful reply, "you do not need to be saved at all. But if you ever are saved it will be on exactly the same ground as any other poor sinner."

Years ago I was amazed to hear an eloquent French evangelist, Paul J. Loizeaux, exclaim, "Oh, how hard it is to find sinners! If only I could find one, I have a marvelous message for him." A moment's thought made his meaning clear. To be a sinner is one thing; to know it is another.

Faithful preaching of man's responsibility will drive this truth home to the conscience. Repentance is the recognition of my sinfulness -- the owning before God that I am as vile as He has declared me to be in His holy Word. Until one comes to this place there is no further word from heaven for any man, except the sentence of doom. This truth does not in the least degree compromise the Gospel of grace. It rather prepares the sinner to know "the grace of God in truth" and to rejoice in it, revelling in the marvellous provision God has made to "satisfy the longing soul."

Just as one may be hungry and not realize it because of a cloyed taste, and so fail to heed the dinner call, so one may be dying for lack of God's gracious provision and have no sense of his lost estate, and therefore no appreciation of the message of grace. The call to repentance is designed of God to produce that soul hunger that will make the distressed one come with full appetite to the Gospel feast. Until one is thus aroused and made conscious of his need he will turn from the Gospel story with indifference and contempt. "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet."

Too often the earnest Gospel preacher dwells on the hopelessness of obtaining salvation by good works, when addressing men whose works are altogether evil and who have no thought of meriting life eternal but care only for the things of this godless world. We are warned against casting pearls before swine. Is it not possible even in Gospel preaching to do this very thing? We may make it all too simple, so easy that we quite misrepresent the God of all grace, who has in all ages first sought to show men their sinfulness and guilt, and then has offered the remedy to those who confessed to their dread disease.

I am persuaded revival would come to believers and awakening to the lost if there were more faithful preachers of the John the Baptist type, who would cry aloud and spare not, but would solemnly show the people their sins

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and call upon them in the Name of the Lord to repent, remembering that he who justifies himself must be condemned by God, but he who condemns himself will find complete justification in Christ, who died for his sins and who now is exalted to God's right hand as a Prince and a Saviour, granting repentance and remission of sins to all who receive His testimony.

"I am not told to labor
To put away my sin,
So foolish, weak and helpless,
I never could begin.
But, blessed truth, I know it,
Though ruined by the fall,
Christ for my sin has suffered,
Yes, Christ has done it all."

It will be seen that repentance is the very opposite of meritorious experience. It is the confession that one is utterly without merit, and if he is ever saved at all it can only be through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, "who gave himself a ransom for all." Here is firm footing for the soul who realizes that all self-effort is but sinking sand. Christ alone is the Rock of our salvation.